

C I R C U SH I S T O R I C A LS O C I E T YNote Sheet No. 2May 15th, 1942

JOHN ROBINSON - 10 BIG SHOWS, 1911 - recalled by C. E. Duble, C.H.S.

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"The Pioneers and Perpetuators of Tented Amusement Institutions". "Three Generations of Successful Circus Kings". "The Oldest and Largest Show in the Universe". I have never forgotten those words, which were the heading of the old-time long yellow heralds used in advance of the old John Robinson, 10 Big Shows thirty years ago, and even before that. I was with this big show the entire season of 1911 and circus fans and others will be interested to read three decades later, the happenings of that period. Winter Quarters were at Terrace Park, Ohio, near Cincinnati and the home of the Robinson Family. "Uncle" John Robinson, the founder passed on in the late 1880's. His son, John F. Robinson (The Governor) and his son John G., carried on from that time. The 1911 season opened in the Armory at Cincinnati, April 18, for a week. First stand under canvas was Wilmington, Ohio. Show train was 47 cars. The immense spread of canvas and the many cages, dens, parade wagons, all of elaborate design and glittering in new paint presented a sight long to be remembered.

All names in this article I recall from memory. Rudolph Gessely was treasurer, and sold big show tickets. Press agent was Punch Wheeler. Col. Cal Towers was Manager of the "Big Double Museum and Wonders of Creation - a Giant Galaxy of Creation's Climax Marvels." Bill Davis, lot superintendent. Ed. Van Shaik, big show announcer and official mail man. Chas. Gerlack, band-master of the big show band. Alex. Berry, leader side-show band and minstrels, Buggy Stump, trainmaster. Big Top was six centre poles, three rings and one elevated stage. Menagerie tent six or eight poles. William DeMott was equestrian Director, bare-back rider, and did a four-horse jockey act. Eunice DeMott equestrienne. DeComa Troupe, 4 people, big aerial return act, three troupes of acrobats the DeBolien's, the Linniger's, and the Waltons, latter doing a Roman statuary act also. Togas and Geneve on the tight wire, Helen Leach, Weekly and Wood, Fred Biggs and Robettas Trio in various slack wire feats and balancing. Biggs also created a lot of laughs on the track before the performance as an impersonator; Warren Travis, billed as the world's strongest man, lifted 14 men on a platform; supported a walk way in form of a bridge over which horses passed; shouldered immense dumb bells; and bent bars of iron with his bare hands. In concert he allowed an auto to be driven over him containing four persons.

Berry and Hicks appeared in novelty balancing and break-a-way ladder displays. Frank LeRose, equilibrist, the Ledgetts riders, Hackett Sisters, manage riders; the Howards, 4 people on the unsupported ladders appeared on the elevated stage; the O'Wessney's presented their English carrying act and trained horse displays. Capt. Alber's trained Polar Bears and Mlle. Marguerite, trained lions appeared as separate acts in the steel arena. A few of the clowns were Newport and Stirk, Bill Ashe, Downing Bros., McCammon and Robettas, John Mangels did clever hoop and club juggling.

The big top performance closed with Prince Lucci, real Russian Cossacks, 6 in number, in daring and breakneck riding displays. A troupe of real Sioux Indians gave their war dances and pastimes of the Old West concluding with hanging of the horse thief. Gene Durand and Harry Wheeler did a black-face act that was a knock-out, both sold reserve seat and concert tickets, and were old-time minstrel performers. Biggs in a comedy song and Robettas were others in the after-show concert.

A bad wind storm struck the show July 4 at Union City, Pa., at noon. The matinee and night show was given with side wall enclosure minus the top, to big business. At Ogdensburg, N.Y., another storm was encountered, blowing down the cook house just before supper, and at Bellefontaine, Ohio; after a downpour, water was knee deep on the lot after the matinee. The Labor Day stand was Memphis, Tenn.; many were turned away afternoon and night. Cotter, Ark., was the smallest town played, afternoon performance only was given to big business. Show covered 16 States, playing 42 stands in Ohio. The old John Robinson show had a great reputation in the South during its long career. Old-time Southern darkies all knew the "Ol 'John Rob'son Sho'".

In the menagerie were 9 elephants, the largest "Bazil", being with the show forty years or more; 12 camels, sacred cattle and 17 cages and dens. These were as large and costly as any circus owned. Paintings by an artist appeared on some. I recall, one, a massive tiger den with golden domes. There was a painting on the sides, of the Robinson home and scenes at Terrace Park. Crowds lined the streets of every town and city, eager to see the street parade. All cages went in parade drawn by four and six horse teams of duns, grays and blacks, with brass studded harness and trappings. Two elaborate band wagons with heavy carvings were in line, the "Golden Peacock" leading, drawn by 12 black horses with enamel trappings and waving plumes, preceded by six lady and gent buglers riding dun horses, with purple robes. There was also a mounted band, the eight Holloway brothers, who were ushers in the big show. It may be mentioned that in 1900 and there-a-bouts, the "spec" "King Solomon, His Temple, and The Queen of Sheba" was presented at the opening of the performance on a big stage, occupying a good portion of one side of the big top.

The 1911 season was a pleasant and profitable one - ending at New Albany, Miss. November 16. That was the final year of the show under the ownership and management of the Robinson Family. Incidentally the same year was the final one for the Forepaugh-Sells Show. Both closed in Northern Mississippi a day or so apart. Mugivan and Bowers obtained the JOHN ROBINSON CIRCUS title from John Robinson in 1916, the show passing into the hands of the Ringling interests in 1929: they operating it to the end of the 1930 season. The "Old John Robinson Show" was founded about 1824 some say, around Buchanan, Va. The name will always live as one of America's representative circuses.

The above article is a sample of the authentic first-hand, Historical items supplied to members of the Circus Historical Society, at frequent intervals. Receive them regularly! Join now. \$2.00 per year. For information address - the Secretary; John B. Lyon, 22-A Charles St., Guelph, Ontario, Canada.

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